

FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE:

**A Position Paper on the Importance of
a City-wide Agenda for the
First Two Decades of Life**

WHY INVEST IN YOUNG PEOPLE?

“Our future depends on how we treat [our] children.”

Richard Stolley in Money Magazine

The greater a community's investment in its children, the greater return it will realize when they become adults. Supporting families and their children through the first two decades of life helps ensure that youth become valuable resources to the community and its workforce rather than a drain on resources through high cost social programs and lost earning power.

WHY INVEST NOW?

“The significant problems we face today cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.”

Albert Einstein

Hampton has over ten years of sustained and focused investment in young people and families. However, as a mature city, we face increasing challenges of diminishing resources, increasing needs, and a changing, more diverse population.

In today's society, the developmental infrastructure is crumbling. Many families are isolated and living in poverty. Children spend only a fraction of their time with family compared to a decade ago, leaving parents less time to accomplish a more daunting task than faced by previous generations. Many youth are adrift, feeling alienated from community, and susceptible to influence from negative environments, media and “Madison Avenue.”

A common sentiment is that “we must invest in children because they are our future.” However, research provides even more compelling evidence for the need to pay attention to a youth agenda.

- ◆ Children who are born healthy and raised by parents who are involved in their lives and learning are more likely to succeed in school.
- ◆ Children with positive early childhood learning experiences are less likely, as young adults, to be involved in crime or receive public assistance.
- ◆ Children raised without violence in their home are far more likely to use peaceful conflict resolution when they are older; those who witness violence are more likely to use it.
- ◆ Children who read at grade level by third grade have a greater probability of succeeding in school and in the workforce.
- ◆ Young people who experience a greater number of developmental assets are less likely to be involved with risky behaviors and more likely to adopt positive behaviors.
- ◆ Young people with specific life skills are more prepared for success in the workforce.
- ◆ Youth engaged in civic responsibilities are more likely to carry that behavior to adulthood.

Older neighborhoods and schools, intertwined in a spiral of disinvestment, lose their ability to support families, putting extraordinary stress on the schools to help students succeed.

Additional pressure is exerted from the recent *No Child Left Behind* legislation requiring compliance with standards that all groups of students reach proficiency within 12 years. Further, schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress toward statewide proficiency goals face, over time, corrective action and restructuring measures at a high cost to the locality.

Hampton's well-being, indeed its economic vitality, will depend on how well the community supports our most vulnerable members and recognizes our shared responsibility to ensure the healthy development of all our youth.

HOW AN INVESTMENT WORKS

“Child and adolescent development is not a set of unrelated stages or steps but rather a continuous process, with early experiences and opportunities helping to shape later ones . . . This calls for continuous attention to the foundation of healthy development throughout the life span.”

Peter Benson in All Kids are Our Kids

Supporting children through the first two decades of life can be analogous to building a house. Just as a structurally sound house is built from the foundation upward, within each developmental stage from birth to adulthood, certain milestones must be met in order for a young person to grow to the next stage. These developmental opportunities become the challenges our community must face, ensuring that as many youth as possible meet all of them.

The early years: before birth to eight

Using the analogy of the house, early childhood experiences lay the foundation for a child’s success as an adult. Much has been documented in the literature about the relationship of healthy births and early childhood experiences to positive outcomes later in life. A child’s brain develops according to heredity and early life experiences. Early experiences directly affect the way the brain is wired, creating the equipment needed for lifelong learning and successful relationships. As the child grows older, neural connections that are not reinforced through activity disappear.

A stable, safe and loving family is essential for nurturing, stimulating and teaching the child. Children who are touched, played with and read to are more likely to thrive. The process of learning to read begins at birth and continues until approximately age eight. Reading to a preschool child on a daily basis is one of the best ways to stimulate early brain development and to build early literacy skills. In addition, reading to a young child builds a nurturing relationship

Key outcomes:

- ◆ Children are born healthy
- ◆ Children enter school ready to learn
- ◆ Children read at grade level by the third grade

between the child and the reader and promotes healthy social and emotional development.

A parent’s ability to nurture, teach, support and ensure health care for a child influences the child’s readiness for school. Programs that support parents in carrying out these responsibilities result in improved parenting skills and enhanced child development.

Quality pre-schools create an additional support system for families and assist children to become physically, socially and emotionally ready for school.

The middle years: eight to fourteen

Continuing the analogy of building a house, the middle years build the framework that shapes and strengthens the structure. Each child begins to create a conceptual and moral framework for how the world works and their role in the world. After spending the first eight years learning to read, they now begin reading to learn. Children begin to get a wider sense of the world around them, beyond their immediate family and neighborhood. Parents are challenged to keep up with changes in their child, while monitoring increased challenges from the world around them. Academics are important at this age; however, a child’s social and emotional development figure prominently. Acquiring these new life skills can even impact academic success.

This stage is critical for building assets that will shape the child's knowledge, skills, abilities, and character. Young people who approach this stage of life with few assets are at great risk for failure in high school and, ultimately, as adults. Those with more assets have a greater chance of success. As children leave childhood behind and enter adolescence their success rests on two key components:

- caring families, schools and neighborhoods; and
- personal responsibility and character development.

Investments made in these two areas will create a community in which children can build on their early childhood foundations to make a smooth transition to adolescence, in so doing, building a strong framework that will allow them to be successful adults.

The teen years: fourteen through nineteen

In this phase the house takes on the shape and character that allows it to stand with its own unique identity. The foundation and framework have shaped its general direction -- only now do we see the full potential, the utility, beauty, and livability of the structure.

Over the past 10 years, a new way of thinking has emerged about the teen years and defining the outcomes we want for our youth. Unfortunately, our culture has become so expert at articulating what we don't want for our youth (drug use, violence, pregnancy) we have mistaken these as outcomes of what we do want for them. But being free of problems does not equate with being prepared for success, or being fully engaged in community and all aspects of one's life.

A youth development approach, which sees youth in terms of their assets, contributions, and their potential success is the necessary approach for the youth agenda at this stage. There remains a need for services such as family support, prevention of specific problems, and treatment for youth with serious problems. However, the community's investment must ensure that all youth (including those in foster care, juvenile justice, etc.) have the supports and opportunities that help them develop the knowledge, skills and personal attributes that prepare them for adulthood.

Ultimately, we want young people to be competent, caring, and committed. This interplay of mastering various aspects of ability and becoming a contributing member of a community results in confident young men and women who are better prepared to assume their roles as worker, neighbor, parent, and leader.

Key outcomes:

- ◆ Young people graduate from high school
- ◆ Young people are on a path to pursue a career goal
- ◆ Young people are engaged in civic responsibility

Key outcomes:

- ◆ Young people report 30 or more assets
- ◆ Young people acquire specific life skills
- ◆ Young people pass the third through eighth grade Standards of Learning

It is essential that teens are seen as resources to the community's youth agenda. Not only do they possess the ability to support their own positive development, they carry the insight to help improve the community for other youth.

HAMPTON'S COMMITMENT TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH

“Hampton is committed to becoming a community in which the well-being of children is of primary importance and whose policies and programs treat young people as the foundation of our city’s future.”

Adopted by Hampton City Council, 1993

In the early 1990s, Hampton embarked on a long-term commitment to become a community that supports families in raising healthy, competent and successful children who contribute to the quality of life of the community. The city’s first strategic plan for youth, adopted in 1993, outlined four essential elements for creating a family and youth-friendly community.

- We need strong families that have the support, skills and resources to raise healthy children.
- We need safe, caring neighborhoods where children and their families can thrive.
- We need a community-wide system that focuses on the positive development of young people and creates opportunities that allow them to be engaged in the life of the community.
- We need a community-wide commitment to the value of young people as citizens both now and in the future.

These essential elements support families and young people from birth until they reach adulthood, and culminate in the vision:

“Hampton will create an environment in which our youth contribute to the community in a manner that positively impacts the quality of life and are empowered to meet their full potential.”

HOW ARE WE DOING ON OUR COMMITMENT?

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

James Baldwin

Since 1992, Hampton has created several innovative initiatives to address the developmental journey of its youngest citizens. These effective, award-winning approaches have benefited thousands of youth and families. However, thousands more could benefit, and in a time of diminishing resources, we struggle with carrying these initiatives to scale.

The early years: before birth to eight

The City of Hampton is a recognized national leader in joining with the community and its families to prepare children to start school healthy and ready to succeed. The Healthy Families Partnership contains many of the key components of the parent education, support and children’s health services that are necessary for early childhood success. A recent benchmark study of the program shows that these services, which focus primarily on children in their preschool years, are positively impacting such indicators as healthy births and immunizations.

Successes:

- The city has improved in five areas: first trimester prenatal care, healthy birth index, infant mortality, child abuse and neglect, and births to teens.
- Progress in the measured indicators occurred during a decade when the city was becoming increasingly at risk.
- Hundreds of parents each year benefit from parenting training, and all families with young children are offered specific information through parenting newsletters and at the local libraries.

Challenges

- 15% of children are still entering school without the readiness to learn and 22% of Hampton's 1,800 kindergarteners started school needing extra help in pre-reading skills.
- Anecdotal information points to some of Hampton's most challenged neighborhoods where as high as 50% of the children lack pre-school experience.
- Many families are still not being reached with needed services.

Community leaders in Hampton are taking a leadership role to tackle the effects of violence on young children. Current prevention efforts have already resulted in a decrease in child abuse and neglect. New strategies are targeting the negative effects on children when they witness violence in their home and community.

The middle years: eight to fourteen

There are a wide variety of activities provided to children of this age group. In addition to the hundreds of middle school-aged youth involved with the Department of Parks and Recreation and youth sports leagues, a recent survey of non-profit youth programs shows over twice as many youth of this age being served compared to older teens. To increase after-school and neighborhood-based support for this age group, the city and schools created In-SYNC Partnerships. The goal of this project is to connect neighborhoods, families and schools in ways that support the positive development of youth in the local community.

Successes

- Curriculum offerings have expanded at all middle schools and families have more options including year round schooling and a technology magnet.
- After-school child care and enrichment programs are offered at nineteen elementary schools, three middle schools and five community sites serving over 1,00 youth daily.
- Community support for older elementary-age youth is very strong as exemplified by an increase in faith-based and non-profit organizations developing after-school programs.

Challenges

- The average number of developmental assets reported by 8th graders was 19.2.
- Many parents lack opportunities to acquire the skills needed to support their child in the age of technology, and many children lack the benefits of technology in the home.
- There is a need for more opportunities for young people to connect in meaningful, age-appropriate ways to adult mentors, and to their neighborhood and community. This group is at great risk for alienation and very few community members have the skills necessary to work effectively with them.

The teen years: fourteen to nineteen

The city's current approach to youth development in the teen years through the Coalition for Youth has been adopted as a national model for youth engagement. Its two-fold strategy is to:

- bring the principles and practices of youth development and asset-building to all youth-focused organizations and individuals throughout the community so that all youth who are receiving the entire spectrum of the community's services have the opportunity to develop their skills and potential; and
- support a community-wide system of youth engagement, with opportunities from community service to shared leadership, so that young people become contributing members of the community and the community benefits from their input and expertise.

Successes:

- Over 2000 youth per year are involved in civic engagement throughout the community.
- Hundreds of youth assume key leadership roles in neighborhoods, schools, and the community, and are positively influencing the decisions that impact them.
- With the BEST Initiative, Hampton has developed an exemplary system for training youth workers, supporting their professional development, and ensuring that the principles and practices of youth development are incorporated into all youth-focused organizations.

Challenges

- Too many youth still do not have the benefits of positive youth development, especially those who are hard to engage or in intervention or juvenile justice services. The community loses the potential benefits of their contributions.
- At a time of need for increased skills in the local workforce, less opportunity is available for preparing youth, especially the hard-to-reach youth, to succeed.
- Teens still lack activities and places specific for their age group. Many believe adults abandon them when they reach the teen years, and only 19% believe the community values them.

WHAT'S NEXT?

"Cherishing children is the mark of a civilized society."

Joan Ganz Cooney

The challenge city government faces is to leverage our current successes and create a seamless system to

support young people in the first two decades of life. Creating a comprehensive, strategically-focused, family support and youth development system is the most effective way to protect the investments we are already making and grow those investments to maximize return.

Protecting our investment: A note about young adults

Most young adults have choices when deciding where to live, work and raise their families. For Hampton to be a top choice, it must be an attractive place for them to invest. Economic opportunities, career choices, schools, real estate, and quality of life all play a role in these decisions. Additionally, the quality of a person's youth development experiences will influence a choice to return to a community if it has been a caring and supportive place. It is to the city's advantage to remain connected to - to track, connect with, and involve - all our young adults. Not only can they help us determine the results of our initial investments in them; they can become the new generation of support in achieving our strategic goals.

To be successful, the city must:

- ✓ **Build on successes.** We must “stay the course” and continue to invest in the things that are working. The goals of ensuring literacy, building developmental assets, and preparing youth for the future will be prominent throughout the next decade and it will be important to remain focused on them.
- ✓ **Address the challenges.** Without a new infusion of resources, we must find creative ways to increase the supports available to those in need while we “cast a wider net” to involve an ever increasing number of youth and families.
- ✓ **Build partnerships.** Essential to our success will be a strong alliance between city government and schools, as well as successful partnerships with neighborhoods and a wider variety of community partners who care about young people and their families. We must also continue to discover the best ways to enlist young people as resources for their creative expertise and willing assistance in the issues that impact them.
- ✓ **Re-group, re-energize.** Internally, city government needs to overcome artificial barriers and bureaucratic differences in order to focus our efforts on working together to achieve shared, mutually-accountable outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Hampton’s children are on a developmental journey from birth to adulthood. Their success will be largely due to external supports available to them throughout their developmental stages, and internal qualities they are able to develop along the way. The mark of a healthy community is the extent to which these supports are provided to as many youth and their families as possible.

Ultimately a community wants its young people to have every opportunity to be healthy, principled and creative – to find things they are good at, to have the confidence to pursue their dreams, and to be surrounded by people who care about and support them. As they move into adulthood they need the skills and abilities to earn a living wage and contribute positively as citizens of the community while gaining an ever-increasing voice in decisions that affect them.

Hampton’s economic vitality, the strength of its workforce, and its “livability” as a community will depend upon our continued support of families and attention to the developmental needs of young people throughout the first two decades of life. We must realize the stake we all have in nurturing and supporting the healthy development of our youngest citizens.